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CIA's gloomy prognosis for the Philippines

The United States believes that within three years Communist guerrillas in the Philippines could achieve military parity with the Philippine army. This new assessment of the Communist threat to the country, based on reports by the Central Intelligency Agency, is even more alarming than a warning given to a U.S. congressional subcommittee in March. Then, Richard Armitage, an assistant U.S. secretary of defense, said that the way things were going, the guerrillas could achieve parity within five years.

The CIA not only now sees an earlier danger but offers little hope that the government of President Marcos can do much to counter it.

The Americans judge that the Philippine armed services, run by old and desk-bound generals, are incapable of reform. Morale among the rank and file is low. Military supplies in many areas are dangerously scarce. Most military aircraft are grounded for lack of spare parts and enough maintenance. Three out of four army trucks and two-thirds of the navy's ships are out of order. Many soldiers are without uniforms or boots.

The Reagan administration is prepared to give the Philippines $102 million in a seemingly forlorn bid to stop the rot. The U.S. Congress is worried about the future of Subic Bay and Clark Field, the two largest American military bases outside the United States, and what will become of some $3 billion worth of private American investment in the country. But Congress, alarmed by statements by Mr. Armitage and others, before it opens its purse wants some proof that any money it authorizes will not be wasted.

Understandably, American pressure on the Philippine government is no longer very subtle. In May the head of the CIA, William Casey, made a four-day visit to Manila, during which he is understood to have told Mr. Marcos to call an immediate presidential election. The president does not have to go to the polls until 1987, and has repeatedly said he will not hold an election before then.

Of special concern to American worriers is the fact that many Filipinos are not now particularly anti-Communist. The CIA estimates that 55 percent of all Filipinos are indifferent to the prospect of a Communist victory. This seems an unusually precise figure in a country where public opinion is not easy to measure, but the trend toward acceptance of the idea of a Communist government is undoubtedly growing.

And those who don't want communism are not all that reassuring. They assume that the Americans will charge to the rescue. The minister of defense, Juan Ponce Enrile, said in May that "if the circumstances change," the Philippines may invoke its mutual defense treaty with the United States and call for American troops.

Exactly how strong are the guerrillas? The Communist Party of the Philippines and its military wing, the New People's Army, are now thought to be active in 59 of the country's 73 provinces. According to the Philippine government, the Communists control 4 percent of the country's 41,615 villages. American observers believe the figure is at least 20 percent. Last year government forces clashed with the Communists in 3,500 engagements in which more than 3,000 died (at least a third were soldiers, militiamen, and policemen; another third were said to be guerrillas).

The Communists say they will start urban guerrilla warfare in Manila next year and bring the army to a "strategic stalemate" by 1987. The government says that the New People's Army has 10,000-12,000 guerrillas. The true figure may be around 20,000. That would be about a tenth of the size of the 210,000-strong armed forces. An army is believed to need a superiority of at least 10-to-1 to beat an insurgency.

Most of the fighting has been in north and east Mindanao, in Samar and in the central mountains of Luzon. The guerrillas have so far been unable to penetrate the Moslem areas of central Mindanao and Sulu (scene of the now-dormant Moslem separatist movement and a war that claimed 60,000 lives in the 1970s), but they have found their way into every other province along the eastern seaboard of the country and are working their way westward. One new front is the island of Negros, where 300,000 sugarcane cutters are out of work.

The Communists have the support of a number of Roman Catholic priests and nuns, who believe that only a revolution can put an end to the country's problems. In Luzon, Father Conrado Balweg leads a band of guerrillas, and a reward of $11,000 is offered for his capture. In a country where 80 percent of the 55 million people are Catholic, the approval by these priests has been decisive in persuading many peasants to join the New People's Army.

The Communist Party is banned, but operates politically through front organizations that exploit the government's unpopularity and bad luck. Living standards have fallen, partly because of a collapse of the world market price for sugar (hence the unemployment in Negros) and coconuts, both important exports. On May 5 the National Democratic Front, the main Communist front organization, won the largest group of seats (29) on the national council (132 seats) of the country's newest and most broadly based political party, the New Nationalist Alliance.

The Communists have achieved their success without leaders of obvious appeal (most are shadowy men about whom the government knows little), without foreign support, and with a modest assortment of arms, mostly of World War II vintage. Yet they are considered a greater threat than the Communist-led Hukbalahaps (Huks), whom the United States helped to put down in the late 1940s by kicking out a corrupt administration and installing an obscure politician, Ramon Magsaysay, as president of the Philippines.

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The present Communist Party, founded by a group of university professors and students who broke with the semicriminal remnants of the Moscow-following Huks in 1968, is Maoist in philosophy. Linking up with a disaffected young Huk commander and some of his men (who formed the nucleus of the New People's Army), the Maoists set out to "politicize" peasants and tribal minorities in remote areas where government abuse and neglect were common.

In 1972 the entire movement, then barely 600 strong, narrowly escaped annihilation when the Communists were encircled by government troops. Since then, its original plan to establish "liberated areas" has been abandoned. Instead, it aims to set up village governments wherever it can. A decentralized system of command has protected the party from betrayal, even though most of the original leaders have been killed or captured, and torture is used to try to make prisoners talk.

The goverment's response to military setbacks has been to arm any civilian who is prepared to fight the Communists, whatever his character. Many people have been killed in private vendettas as a result of this policy. The policy has also been a recruiting agent for the Communists, who blame Mr. Marcos's "army of occupation" for unemployment, landlessness and the militarization of the country.

But there have been atrocities by both sides. Despite the Communists' efforts to publicize themselves as the local equivalents of Robin Hood, scores of mayors and other officials have been murdered. The New People's Army apologized when a recent massacre involved women and children.

Only in the capital, Manila, it seems, does life go on relatively undisturbed. But even there, confusion is widespread. The minister of defense wavers between denying that the Communists are a serious menace and calling for more military aid from the United States. Mr. Marcos insists that the army will lick the Communists "within six months." His colleagues fulminate against possible "American intervention."

Looking at this problem of a country, the Americans are understandably at a loss. The Philippines has had a troubled history. The American liberation of the islands from Spain at the turn of the century resulted in the deaths of a quarter of a million Filipinos. A million Filipinos died — as did many Americans — during the Japanese occupation and American recapture of the islands in World War II. The first post-1945 governments were marked by corruption. Mr. Marcos put an end to the democratic experiment in 1972, when he rewrote the country's constitution and made himself dictator.

But, however wearisome the country may be, it won't go away. Many pro-American Filipinos believe that the United States can and should help to replace Mr. Marcos with a better man.

Such as? Hopes that the acting chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Fidel Ramos, would reform the army are fading. His retraining camps for delinquent soldiers are considered as meaningless as Mr. Marcos's recently announced $55 million "civil action" program to win the people's hearts and minds.

Last month a group of junior officers demanded a number of army reforms. The government agreed that their grievances were legitimate, but has dismissed any possibility of an officers' coup. Americans who are in touch with some of these dissidents are not so sure. Nor are those Filipinos who fear that a military government may become another disastrous stopgap non-solution for the country's social and political troubles.

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